



Now trim highway pork

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Congress' approval of a rescue plan for the federal highway fund will ensure that states can meet their contract obligations and that road projects will go forward. The next step for the fund's long-term health should be eliminating, or drastically reducing, the earmark projects that drain limited transportation resources.

Declining revenues were expected to put the highway fund \$8.3 billion in the hole by the end of September, with another month left in the federal fiscal year. Compare that to the \$24 billion cost of earmarked transportation projects for the year, and the argument for reform is easy to make.

Transportation Secretary Mary Peters' call for an emergency appropriation was finalized with a voice vote in the Senate last week and is expected to be signed by President Bush, despite the earlier threat of a veto. Previously, a White House spokesman described the use of general revenues by the highway fund as "a dangerous precedent that shifts costs from users to taxpayers at large."

More threatening to taxpayer interests is the persistence of highway pork. Secretary Peters said that the long-term financial health of federal highway funding requires that Congress "eliminate the billions in wasted spending, thousands of unneeded earmarks and hundreds of conflicting and contradictory special interest programs."

Earmarks are typically obtained by members of Congress outside the normal process, thereby avoiding the requisite scrutiny — for example, Alaska's notorious "Bridge to Nowhere."

Congress had been warned of the problems with highway funding early this summer, when revenue losses became apparent with the decline in miles driven and in gas purchases. In a hearing before a congressional subcommittee in June, S.C. Transportation Secretary H.B. "Buck" Limehouse outlined the problems facing the highway fund and urged Congress to expand the revenue stream beyond the gas tax — an action that the funding emergency has since forced.

"The fuel tax has proven ineffective in meeting the demands made on our highway system. This is a shrinking revenue source, and it doesn't apply to highway users who drive alternative fuel vehicles," Mr. Limehouse told the congressional panel.

Without reform, the federal highway fund can expect more woes down the road. The difficulty in providing basic highway funding argues first for sharp cuts to highway earmarks.

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